

Air Force medics provide medical relief in Guatemala
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5/7/2007 - VANDENBERG AIR FORCE BASE, Calif. (AFNEWS) -- Thirteen Airmen from various Air Force Space Command bases returned April 30 from 10 days in Guatemala where they provided much needed medical care to the people there -- services that would have been otherwise nonexistent.

From their home base in Salama, the team of Airmen, which included physicians, pediatricians, optometrists, dentists, public health professionals and pharmacists, took buses to three of the more impoverished areas in the country to do what they could to improve the quality of life for the thousands who were able to show up.

"When we arrived at a location at 7:30 in the morning, there were literally thousands of people there waiting for us," said Capt. (Dr.) Dwayne Kisby, a pharmacist with the 30th Medical Group here who prepared for the trip 10 weeks in advance.

A small, heavily populated country, Guatemala was once home to the powerful Mayan civilization. Today, most of its people live in rural areas among sugarcane fields, volcanoes and lush rainforests. The poverty level is nearly 60 percent; a number so high, that health care is something many have only heard of but have never seen.

The team of medical Airmen saw as many patients as possible, but the patient turnout was nearly overwhelming.

"Some of these people had started to line up on the street the night before and didn't end up being seen until two to three o'clock the next afternoon," Captain Kisby said. "And the sad part is that some of them were still not able to be seen."

Even with the medical team's best efforts, not all patients who were seen could be helped. When a woman with cancer in her eye arrived for treatment, the team found nothing could be done for her at the facility.

"The hardest part of the whole trip," said Staff Sgt. Oscar Hernandez, a Vandenberg public health professional, "was when someone made it through all those hours of waiting, and we would have to look them in the face and say, 'I'm sorry, we don't have what you need.' To know that you could do all that planning and help so many people, but there were still those you just couldn't help -- that was the hardest and most memorable part."

But in spite of the factors against them, the Airmen saw more than 8,000 patients in 10 days. Such a success would not have been possible without pre-deployment preparation.

The 30th MDG pharmacy had some of the most time-consuming preparation prior to the trip, which included ordering the medications, finding volunteers to help pre-count all the medications, pre-fill prescription containers, as well as having to translate the medical instructions into Spanish.

Other preparation was completed by the Guatemalan Department of Health.

"The Guatemalan Department of Health predetermined the selected areas as the areas most in need of medical attention," said Capt. (Dr.) Daniel Rohweder, one of the physicians from the 30th MDG who aided in the relief.

That medical attention consisted of mainly nutritional supplements, parasitic treatment and acute pain treatment.

"We really ran the gamut of treatment, from arthritis to depression to congestive heart failure," Captain Rohweder said. Many symptoms and conditions indicated of the kind of health care the Guatemalan people had available to them.

"One of the most shocking things was not just the lack of medical care, but the complete absence of it," Captain Rohweder said. "So while what we were able to do may seem very small, at least by American standards, when you give them some pain medication or steroids for the knees, or even just vitamins, it can drastically increase their quality of life, if even for a short time."

Even though the team provided much needed care and relief to so many, the constant flow of pain and disease could be emotionally draining. Still, there were cases that reminded the team why they were there in the first place.

"There were some people there who you could tell were not sick, but only sent by the mothers to come down and get some medication to bring home," said Sergeant Hernandez, who helped out as an interpreter for the team. "Then there were people like the 85-year-old man who came in just for some minor pain in his leg. We offered him other things, but he said, 'No, I'm fine, I just want something for my leg.' You would think a man of his age, spending so much of his life in the sugarcane fields, he would have a bunch of other problems; but all he wanted was something for the pain in his leg."

"He was also prior military," added Maj. (Dr.) Paulette Lassiter, another Vandenberg physician on the team. "He was just thrilled to be telling us all of his stories and so excited to be seen by a military doctors; he saluted us when he left."

During the 10-day period the team from AFSPC pulled nearly 900 teeth and repaired nearly 100 more, given out almost 1,100 pairs of eyeglasses and prescribed nearly 32,000 prescriptions.

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